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ABSTRACT

To help make school districts more accountable without resorting to minimum competency testing, the Minnesota legislature in 1976 passed a law requiring the state's 434 districts to prepare annual planning and evaluation reports (PERs). The PER law obliges districts to develop educational policies and review them annually; create an instructional plan; encourage community participation in policy-making, instructional planning, and evaluation; use tests and other means to evaluate progress; develop school improvement plans where needed; and report annually to the public and the state department of education. Data from the state's summary of the local district reports indicate increasing compliance with the PER law and greater use of improvement plans in most curriculum areas, but relatively low public availability of PER documents and a decline in the number of districts reporting community advisory committees. However, more districts are participating in the state's "piggyback" testing program, using test items developed by the state as well as locally-created items. Comparison of Minnesota's PER law with other states' competency laws shows that while PER is not rigorously enforceable, it does require local participation but without state expenditures. (Author/RW)

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"Planning, Evaluating and Reporting - Minnesota's Response to Accountability"

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The public's call for accountability has been issued. While at least 37 states have mandated minimum competency testing in schools in the past few years, a few have sought some form of alternative to state mandates to force accountability.[1]

Minnesota is one state where the state legislature has turned the question of accountability back to the local school districts. In 1976 the Minnesota Legislature passed a law requiring each of the 434 local school districts to prepare an annual planning and evaluation report (PER) for the local community and to submit such reports to the department of education each August, beginning in 1979.

Briefly, the Minnesota Legislature directed each district to set up its own policies and goals, examine its curricula and write an evaluation report, and submit the report along with a plan for program improvement, including instructional plans, to the public.[2]

The legislation also encouraged each local school board to appoint a curriculum advisory committee to provide for active community participation in the development of the district educational policy, the instructional policy and plan, as well as evaluating progress and reporting to the public.

Further, the legislation provided for assistance to be provided by the state department of education, on request of local districts, in planning and evaluation, including testing.

A synopsis of the requirements included in the legislation follows.

Minnesota PER Legislative Requirements[3].
(Minnesota Statute 123.741)

**SUBDIVISION 1 - Educational Policy Requirement. The local school board shall develop, adopt and review annually, with staff involvement encouraged, a written educational policy which establishes:
- district educational goals,
- a process for achieving the goals,
- a procedure for evaluating and reporting progress toward the goals.

A 1979 amendment encourages the policy to consider:
- the number of dropouts of school age in the district and the reasons for the dropouts,
- existing programs within the district for dropouts and potential dropouts,
- program needs of dropouts and potential dropouts.

SUBDIVISION 2 - District Instructional Plan Requirement. The local school board shall instruct the administrative and professional staff to develop an instructional plan for the purpose of implementing the district goals. The instructional plan shall:
- include measurable objectives, in so far as possible, and
- include other appropriate means to direct and evaluate progress towards the goals which are not easily measurable.

**Items to be reported annually to citizens of the district and to the State Board of Education.

SUBDIVISION 3 - Community Participation Encouraged. The local board is encouraged to appoint a curriculum advisory committee to provide for active community participation in the development of the district educational policy, the development of the instructional plan and in evaluating progress and reporting to the public.

**SUBDIVISION 4 - Evaluation and School Improvement Plan Requirement. A final evaluation of progress shall be conducted annually which includes both professional and consumer evaluations. The professional staff evaluation shall utilize:
- test results,
- other performance data,
- faculty interpretations and judgements,

The consumer evaluation shall include:
- opinions of students,
- opinions of parents, and
- opinions of other district residents.

**Upon receipt of the evaluation results, each school board shall:
- review the evaluation results, and
- develop appropriate school improvement plans to improve areas where goals have not been met.

SUBDIVISION 5 - Annual Reporting Requirement. The school district shall report annually:
- the district PER policy (Subd. 1)
- the reports of the annual evaluation (Subd. 4)
- the plans for school improvement (Subd. 4)

The information shall be made available to the citizens of the school district through media releases and other means of communicating with the public. These documents shall also be on file and available for inspection by the public.

An information copy of this report shall be sent to the State Board of Education by August 1 of each year.

M.S. 123.742

SUBDIVISION 1- Department of Education shall collect the annual evaluation reports as provided in M.S. 123.741, Subd. 5 and make them available upon request to any districts seeking to use them for purposes of comparison of student performance.

** Items to be reported annually to citizens of the district and to the State Board of Education.

Summary of Selected Components of Local PER Reports

In accord with the provisions of the PER legislation, (M.S. 123.742) the Minnesota Department of Education annually publishes a report on its review of the local PER reports which are submitted as required by the legislation. Selected data from the January, 1982, report,[4,5] which includes data from reports of first three years (1979, 1980, and 1981) of required reporting by school districts are reviewed in this section.

1. Review of Statutory Requirements Included in Annual Reports

As of January 30, 1982, the department of education had received "information copies" of 1981 PER Reports from 392 of 434 or over 90% of local school districts. These reports represent approximately 93% of the Minnesota public school students. Return percentages for 1979 and 1980 were 89% and 96.5% respectively. (Some delay occurs because all test results are not available in time for reporting deadlines.)

A summary of rates of compliance with the statutory componerts of the PER Law is found in Table 1.

While 90% of the 1981 reports included statements of educational goals, more than 25% of the reports submitted did not contain policy statements describing the process for achieving the goals, nor procedures for evaluating and reporting progress toward achievement of the goals.

Table 1

Department of Education's Review
of the Statutory Components
in Local PER Reports
(Based on 392 of 434 Districts)

M.S. 123.74 Local District Planning, Evaluating and Reporting (PER) -- Statutory Requirements for Annual Report.	Appeared to be Included 1979	1980	1981	Appeared not to be included 1979	Unable to Tell 1980	Unable to Tell 1981
A. A written board policy. Areas include:	87%	74%	79%	13%	26%	21%
1. educational goals	94%	72%	90%	6%	28%	10%
2. a process for achieving the goals	73%	55%	74%	27%	45%	26%
3. procedures for evaluating	74%	52%	74%	26%	48%	26%
4. procedures reporting	67%	52%	73%	33%	48%	27%
*5. dropouts and dropout prone	*	9%	16%	*	91%	84%
B. The reports of annual evaluation:	86%	83%	89%	14%	17%	11%
1. Professional evaluation:	86%	83%	89%	14%	17%	11%
a. summary test results	86%	83%	89%	14%	17%	11%
b. other performance data	31%	35%	56%	69%	65%	44%
c. faculty interpretations and judgements	37%	42%	37%	63%	58%	63%
2. Consumer evaluation:	52%	34%	43%	48%	66%	57%
a. student opinions	42%	28%	37%	58%	72%	63%
b. parent opinions	52%	34%	43%	48%	66%	57%
c. resident opinions	42%	21%	28%	58%	79%	72%
C. Plans for school improvement for goals which have not been met.	67%	67%	72%	33%	33%	28%

*Encouraged only, not required--Reference to dropouts and dropout prone added during the 1979 Legislative session to become effective with the 1980 local PER reports. Should not be interpretated as % of districts actually conducting programming for dropouts.

Table 1 also reveals that 89% of the 1981 reports included results of annual evaluation, including professional evaluation and summary

test results. Other performance data (number of graduates, follow-up studies on recent graduates, participation in extra-curricular activities, etc.) were reported by over one-half of the districts reporting. However, consumer (students, parents, residents) evaluations were included in less than one-half of the reports received.

School improvement plans were included in 72% of the reports received. Districts appear to be focusing improvement efforts for the 1981-82 school year most frequently in the areas of reading, mathematics and communications. The curriculum areas most frequently cited in school improvement plans are reported in the following section.

In general, Table 1 reveals a gradual increase in the percentage of reports which address statutory requirements of the Minnesota PER Law.

2. Curriculum Areas Cited in the School Improvement Plans

The legislation charges local school boards with review of the annual evaluation reports and with development of appropriate school improvement plans.

Over the three years, 67% to 72% of the 434 Minnesota school districts indicated improvement plans in several curriculum areas (Table 1). Those which were most frequently indicated are included in Table 2.

Table 2

Curriculum Areas Most Frequently Cited
in the School Improvement Plans

Discipline Areas	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82
Complete Curriculum	*	*	7
Communications	97	103	67
Reading - (but not broader scope of communications)	199	77	121
Math	112	108	123
Science	41	51	53
Social Studies	41	58	55
Health	27	26	22
Physical Education	22	19	11
Music	20	21	25
Art	21	21	20
Secondary vocational courses including business, home economics and industrial arts	26	52	21
Basic Skills	*	*	64
Gifted	*	*	17
Drug Education	*	*	30
Special Education	*	*	10

*No comparable data for 1979-80 and 1980-81

3. Review of the Degree to Which Required Components of PER Reports Were Made Available to the Public

The components of PER reports which were required by statute to be made available to the public through media releases, hearings, etc., include the district's educational policy, the annual evaluation report(s) and the annual school improvement plans. Table 3 contains data which show that many districts, which complied with the requirement that their annual reports contain these components, reported them to the department of education but not to the local citizens. This is not the spirit and intent of the PER legislation.

No data are included regarding the 1979 reports. In that first year it appears that many reports were prepared only for the department of education. In subsequent years it was pointed out to superintendents that PER reports should be made available to the local citizens with some increase in compliance resulting.

Table 3

The Degree to Which the Required Components of PER Reports were Made Available to the Public
(Based on 90% of 434 Districts representing 93% of pupils reporting in 1981)

	YES			UNABLE TO TELL		
	1979	1980	1981	1979	1980	1981
(a) Written Educational Policy	*	57%	65%	*	43%	35%
(b) Annual Evaluation Reports	*	74%	72%	*	26%	28%
(c) Annual School Improvement Plans	*	55%	67%	*	45%	38%

*No comparable data in 1979.

4. Community Advisory Committees

Each school board is encouraged in the PER Law to "appoint a curriculum advisory committee to provide for active community participation..." Such committees are not required by law nor are districts required to report information about them.

The percentage of reports which included information about community curriculum advisory committees has declined from 92% in 1979 to 64% in the 1981 reports. This decline in number of districts reporting on such committees should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in community involvement but as a decline in the percentage of districts reporting on curriculum advisory committees.

PER as an Alternative to Statewide Accountability Mandates

A major intent of the Minnesota PER Law was to leave decisions concerning accountability, e.g. planning, policy, curriculum and evaluation in the hands of local school districts as an alternative to state mandated competency tests or graduation requirements. In this aspect the law has clearly succeeded.

Also, the effectiveness of the law in certain areas, such as providing a vehicle for the continued improvement of educational programs, improving the capability and participation of citizens in planning and evaluating, and improved capabilities of local districts to make decisions about school programs is apparent.

One might get the impression that all testing for local district evaluation programs is designed within local districts and that evaluation results are used only within local districts. This is not the case as data in Table 4 show that some 60% of Minnesota school districts are presently participating in a voluntary "piggyback" testing program sponsored by the Department of Education. The authority for the department to provide this testing service for a reasonable fee to participating districts is included in the PER Law.

Piggyback test items are generated by the Department of Education and provided to districts, if they wish to use them, in almost all subject areas. Thus, the state level only becomes involved insofar as the local districts request involvement. This assessment program aids and utilizes teacher judgement and can play a role in curriculum development. The program also includes statewide comparison data so that local districts can compare their results with those in other school districts in the state if they wish.

Table 4

Minnesota School Districts Participating in the Piggyback Testing Program

School Year	Number of Districts Participating	Percent of Districts Participating
1974-75	12	3
1975-76	12	3
1976-77	62	14
1977-78	92	21
1978-79	162	37
1979-80	188	43
1980-81	245	56
1981-82	260*	60*

*Approximate as data are not complete as of January 29, 1982. Over 40 additional districts are involved in sampling procedures but are not fully participating in the program in 1981-82.

It is interesting to note the sharp increases in participation during the 1976-77 school year and again 1978-79. The PER Law was passed in 1976 and the first reports were required in August, 1979.

Even though the PER Law permits but does not require the setting of minimum competency standards for graduation or progressing to a higher level within a subject area, 17% of Minnesota school districts have done so, according to a recent survey conducted by the Evaluation Section of the Department of Education.[8] Most of the 74 districts using minimum competency standards, use them to promote students at the elementary school level. The report summary notes that most educators feel that "...their day-to-day instructional use is the most appropriate and productive use of such standards. Careful monitoring of achievement, with prescriptive teaching, especially in the early grades, seems to be the best way to ensure that students will meet desired standards by the end of high school".

The question of the effectiveness of Minnesota's PER Law versus that of statewide competency tests and/or graduation requirements in other states becomes apparent. Such comparisons of effectiveness are difficult to make as the purposes of accountability laws in the various states differ widely, thus the measures of success do not lend themselves to comparison from state to state. Some of the problems in Minnesota's approach to accountability;

e.g. lack of enforcement authority, and absence of statewide standards, are not problems in some other states. On the other hand, the Minnesota approach requires local participation and commitment without the large degree of statewide funding and management necessary in many states. Nor are the legal problems related to implementation of statewide competency laws inherent in the Minnesota approach.

Another provision of the PER legislation is beginning to emerge as a significant issue. In enacting PER, the Minnesota legislature set forth the following policy:

> "...the legislature further finds that such a process (PER) is needed to facilitate decisions by school boards and communities as to which services can best be provided by the public schools and which services can or should be provided by other institutions such as the family, the private sector or other public agencies."

This was intended to provide a decision-making process for budget reductions based on local planning efforts. Such plans were to be developed prior to the financial emergencies which many schools are now facing. Districts which planned systematically can now make better decisions in the emotional atmosphere which inevitably surrounds budget reductions.

Given its ambiguities and problems, Minnesota has chosen a flexible and educationally useful alternative to the statewide minimum competency testing programs embarked upon by many other states.

References

1. "Any Alternatives to Mandates?", National Assessment of Educational Progress Newsletter, Denver, Colorado; August, 1979, pp. 1,3.

2. For more detailed background information, the reader is referred to: Tim L. Mazzoni and Van D. Mueller, "School District Planning for Enrollment Decline: The Minnesota Approach", Phi Delta Kappan, February, 1980, pp. 406-410.

3. Unpublished document, Office of Planning and Policy Research, State of Minnesota Department of Education, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1981.

4. "A Review of the Local Curriculum Planning Evaluation and Reporting Legislation (PER)" - draft of an unpublished manuscript, Office of Planning and Policy Research, State of Minnesota Department of Education, St. Paul, Minnesota, January 30, 1982.

5. Appreciation is expressed to Lowell Tornquist, Office of Planning and Policy Research, State of Minnesota Department of Education, for making data available and assisting in presentation and interpretation of data.

6. "A Review of the Local Curriculum Planning Evaluation and Reporting Legislation (PER)" op.cit.

7. "A Review of the Local Curriculum Planning Evaluation and Reporting Legislation (PER)" op.cit.

8. "A Review of the Local Curriculum Planning Evaluation and Reporting Legislation (PER)" op.cit.

9. "Report Shows Minimum Standards Used to Support Instruction in State's Schools", Education Update, State of Minnesota Department of Education, St. Paul, Minnesota, January, 1982, pp. 1 and 8.